

GREG PINCUS

The  
Homework

STRIKE



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History's a mystery.

Science is a curse.



My English grade could use some aid —

My math one's even worse.



My Spanish skill is nearly nil.

PE's like a punch.

The only class I think I'll pass

in middle school is lunch!

1

Maple syrup is good on pancakes, but it's really terrible on homework.

Gregory K. was reminded of this simple fact as he hurried to finish a sheet of math problems while devouring breakfast—and dripping syrup—at the same time.

“Ugh. Right on the three problems I’ve already done,” Gregory moaned as he grabbed a napkin. “What are the odds?”

“The odds are terrible,” his older brother, O, said from the far end of the dining room table, “since the odds were poor that you really got three problems

done in the first place. Oh. Wait. You didn't say got them done right."

Gregory rubbed the napkin on the spill, leaving big chunks of shredded paper behind on his homework.

"You know," his younger sister, Kay, chimed in, peering over the cover of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, "if you just add some bacon and eggs to that page, you could feed it to the dog and you'd have the perfect homework excuse."

"He has the perfect excuse already." O smiled. "He's Gregory K."

"My perfect excuse is that I have to live with you," Gregory said as he dripped water onto the homework sheet in an attempt to de-napkinize it.

"Believe what you want to believe, little brother." O grabbed his own plate and headed into the kitchen. "And by the way, 212, 397, 11 with remainder 4, 22, 3, 14, 6.2, 9.9, 10, and 14. You're welcome."

Gregory glared at his brother until he was no longer in sight, then quickly grabbed his pencil from the tabletop and wrote frantically on his wet, sticky homework.

"You don't really believe those were the right answers, do you?" Kay asked her scribbling brother.

“I do. He saw me without my pencil and dealing with syrup. What better time to mess with me?” Gregory drummed his pencil on the table. “Do you remember the fifth answer?”

Kay returned to her reading with a look that made Gregory wish he’d never gotten out of bed that morning. He stared at the homework, pencil hovering in the air. And then Gregory tossed the pencil aside, grabbed the syrup bottle, and poured a huge puddle onto the paper.

“I saw that, you know,” Kay said, even though her eyes never left the book page. How she could always do that, Gregory had never figured out, chalking it up to “little sister power” or something.

“Just don’t tell Mom, okay?” Gregory looked at his sister with big puppy dog eyes as he smeared the syrup around, adding some extra ripped napkin pieces for good measure.

“Your secret’s safe with me,” Kay said, still engrossed in her book. “But trust me. You need to practice that look in the mirror. It’s not conveying what you want it to.”

Maybe it wasn’t, Gregory thought, and maybe he needed to look in a mirror at some point, but at the

moment he didn't care—his secret was safe and his homework was finished, at least if you defined “finished” as no longer waiting to be done.

Gregory K. walked to school waving his homework in the wind to dry it. As he headed up the long hill to Morris Champlin Middle School, his friend Alex fell into step beside him, untied shoelaces clicking rhythmically against the sidewalk.

“Dude,” Alex said, “it’s too early in the morning to be waving the surrender flag.”

“It’s my math, and I surrendered years ago.” Gregory brushed his hair out of his eyes with his free hand. “Did you get your history done?”

“Finished at the crack of midnight, my friend. You?” Alex popped his knuckles as they walked on.

“Did it with Ana and Benny. Most of it, anyway. You shoulda been there.”

“I was doing math with my tutor, then the bonus Spanish lesson that I never asked for. But it’s all good.”

The two climbed the hill in silence for a moment, the morning sun smiling down on their frowning faces.

“You know what I don’t understand?” Gregory asked. “How do the popular kids have time to be popular? I mean, since seventh grade started, I haven’t had time

to do anything but schoolwork. But they're all doing sports and hanging out at the mall and going to parties and just standing in the hall being all popular and stuff. Maybe they don't sleep?"

"They're all vampires, dude. And to them, you and me are like redshirts on *Star Trek*." Alex grinned. "I think that's my next essay for the newspaper right there."

"What is? How you can mix pop culture references to confuse everyone?"

"You should join the paper. Have a poetry column." Alex leapt over a crack in the sidewalk, his gangly legs seeming to go in four different directions at once.

"Like anyone would read that?" Gregory kicked a rock up the hill. "Anyway, I promised Kelly I'd finish up my book. So if I get free time, that's what I do."

"And . . . ?" Alex looked expectantly at his friend.

"So little time, so little progress." Without breaking stride, Gregory folded his homework in half and swung his backpack off one shoulder to put the paper inside. "Kinda like the film series you were going to make."

"Yeah. That's not happening, unless 'series' means twelve seconds of one film. Then I totally win. But we're talking about your writing here," Alex said.